EDUCATIONAL RITUALS IN ANCIENT MITHILĀ

SHIVA KUMAR MISHRA

The word ritual (saṁskāra) has got its own peculiar associations gathered round it through its long history. It means religious purificatory rites and ceremonies for sanctifying the body, mind and intellect of an individual.[1] The Saṁskāras (rituals) with their paraphernalia were regarded as producing a peculiar indefinable kind of merit for the man who underwent them.[2] The *Grihya Systems*, the Smṛties, the Purāṇas, the Dharma-sūtras etc. are the main references for the rituals. There were different types of rituals in ancient Mithilā. The Gautama Smṛti[3] says, about forty saṁskāras. The list of Angira[4] contains twenty-five Saṁskāras while Vaikhanas[5] speaks of eighteen types. Some scholars accepted only thirteen saṁskāras.[6] But the later Smṛtis supply the list of Sixteen saṁskāras. Out of them there were five educational rituals (saṁskāras). These are—Vidyāraṁbha, Upanayana, Vedārambha, Keśānta and Samāvartana or Snāna.

I. THE VIDYĀRAṀBHA

It was the first educational Saṁskāra in ancient Mithilā. The Vidyāraṁbha Saṁskāra was performed to mark its beginning, and alphabets were taught, when the mind of the child was prepared to receive education. This Saṁskāra is variously named viz. Vidyāraṁbha[7], Akṣarāraṁbha[8], Akṣaras vikaraṇa[9], Akṣarālekhana.[10] Our authorities for

1. Rajbali Pandey, *Hindu Saṁskāra*, Benaras, 1940, p. 27.
2. *Vir-Mitrodaya-Saṁskāra-Prakāsh*, I. p. 138.
3. Gautama Smṛti VIII. 2.
4. V. M. S. Vol. I
5. *Vaikhānas Dharm Sūtra*.
6. *Pārāsar gṛhya sūtra*, *Manu Smṛti*, ii, 16, 26, 29.
7. V. M. S. I. p. 321.
8. Gopinātha Bhatta, Saṁskāra ratnamālā, I.
9. Vasistha quoted in *V. M. S.* I., p. 321.
10. The Mārkaṇḍeya Puraṇa, Ibid.

information about this saṁskāra are a few treatises namely the viramitrodaya[1], Smṛtichandrikā[2], the saṁskāra-ratnamālā of Gopināth Bhatta and the commentary of Aparnika on the *Yājñavalkya-Smṛti.*

According to Viśvāmitra[3] the Vidyāraṁbha Saṁskāra was performed at the age of the child. In the opinion of a Smṛti writer, it could be performed even at the age seven.[4] It must be performed some times before the Upanayana ceremony, but owing to some unavoidable circumstances it might be postponed. According to Bṛhaspati, the wise should begin the learning of alphabets before the second birth.[5] The proper time of performance was from the month of Margaśirṣa to Jyeṣṭha. The months from Āṣādha to the Kārtika, when Lord Viṣṇu was supposed to be sleeping were prohibited for this saṁskāra.[6] During the sūtra and the pre-sūtra periods, the educational session began particularly during the rainy season. But according to the above authority this very season was avoided.

An auspicious day was fixed for performing the saṁskāra, when the Sun was in the northern hemisphere.[7] In the beginning of this ceremony Gaṇesh, Sarasvatī, family goddess, Bṛhaspati, Narayaṇa and Lakṣmī were worshipped by the child, and one's own Veda and the Sūtrakāras of one's own vedic school were paid respects. After this a *Homa* was offered. The teacher facing towards the east, performed the Akṣarāraṁbha of the child who was facing towards the west. The saṁskāra consisted of writing and reading both. On the dung washed surface the following phrases were written with pen which was made by burnt mud. Oṁ Gaṇeśāya namaḥ, Oṁ Sarasvatyai namaḥ, Oṁ Kuladevatāyai namaḥ and Om Lakṣmi Nārāyaṇāya namaḥ. Then the child worshipped the teacher and the latter made the child read thrice what was written. Having read, the child presented clothes and ornaments to the teacher. The Brāhmaṇas were entertained and propitiated with sacrificial fee. In

1. V. M. S., I. p. 321.
2. Saṁskāra-kāṇda, p. 67.
3. V. M. S. I. p. 321; Aparārka, p. 30-31.
4. Sodaṣo-Saṁskāra Vidhi by Pandit Bhimsena Sarma.
5. V. M. S. I. p. 321.
6. Ibid.
7. Vaśiṣṭha, V. M. S. I. p. 321.

return, they blessed the child. The *Ahivāti* ladies waved lamps. In the end the teacher was presented a turban. The ceremonies used to close with the dismissal of gods to their respective places.[1]

II. THE UPANAYANA

It was the second educational ritual in ancient Mithilā. It was not only at the first initiation of a day but at the beginning of every branch of the Veda, that the Upanayana was performed.[2] Evidence is available to show that such was the case. In the Upniṣads we come across a number of cases where a man underwent the rite of upanayana when approaching a Gurū for learning a new branch of philosophy. Yājña-valkaya regards the reading of the Vedas the highest object of the upana-yana. "The teacher, having initiated the pupil with the Mahāvyahṛtis,[3] should teach him Vedas and the rules of conduct.[4] According to Āpas-taṁba the upanayana was meant for learning.[5] Manu says, "In the Vedic birth of the student symbolised by wearing girdle made of Muñga-grass, Savitri is the mother and the teacher the father.[6]

The upanayana, or initiation ceremony took place when, generally the sun was in the northern hemisphere. An auspicious time was selected for the performance of the saṁskāra.[7] This ceremony was that sacrament by which a lad of the three 'twice born' castes entered upon studentship. Gautama says,[8] "the initiation of a Brāhmaṇa shall ordinarily take place in his eighth year. It may also be performed in the ninth or fifth years for the fulfilment of some particular wish. The number of years is to be calculated from conception. That initiation is the second birth. The initiation of a kṣatriya shall ordinarily take place in the eleventh year after conception and that of a vaiśya in the twelfth. Up to the sixteenth year

1. Mārkandeya-Purāṇa.
2. Vaśiṣṭha, V. M. S. I, p. 337.
3. Chāndogya upaniṣad, Vol. ii, p. 7.
4. Yājñavalkya Smṛti I, p. 14.
5. Āpastaṁb-Dharma-Sūtra I.
6. *Manu Smṛti*, ii, p. 170.
7. *Parāsar-Gṛhya-Sūtra*, ii, p. 2; *Āśvālāyana-Gṛhya-Sūtra*, I, p. 19.
8. *Gautama-Dharma-Sūtra*, I, 5-14.

the time for the Savitri initiation of a Brāhmaṇa has not passed. Nor for the initiation of a kṣatriya up to the twentieth year, and the limit for that of a vaiśya extends two years beyond the latter term. The other sūtras contain similar regulations. The age fixed for this was, no doubt, regarded as the ideal to be aimed at, though we see that considerable latitude was provided for the same. A young Brāhmaṇa was thus about seven years of age according to our reckoning when he entered upon the obligations of studentship, and this age is that which has been considered a suitable one by many educationists. It was expressly provided in a later verse that a child should not be made to recite Vedic verses before initiation[1]; but whether this excluded all study cannot be said. Why a later age was provided for kṣatriyas and vaiśyas to commence their studies is not quite clear. They were, of course, not expected to attain to the same proficiency in the vedic sciences as the young Brāhmaṇa, as he alone could perform the sacrificial ritual, and certain portions of the sacred knowledge were reserved for him and their course was, therefore, it may be supposed, not expected to last as long as his. But in this case we should have expected them to have started at the same time and to have left their studentship at an earlier age especially as they had also to learn their own particular crafts. It seems probable, however, that the difference in age was to emphasize the supposed intellectual superiority of the Brāhmaṇa, who was thus ready to begin the study at a younger age than his non-Brāhmaṇa fellows.[2]

In this sense it is called "Janeoo", that is a ceremony in which a boy invested with the sacred Thread. The girdle or sacred cord worn after initiation varied in material according to the caste. For the Brāhmaṇa it was to be of muñja grass; for the kṣatriya, a bow string and for the vaiśya a woolen or hempen thread. The upper garments were to be skins of animal, again varying according to caste and respectively the skin of a black buck, a spotted deer, or a he-goat. For lower garments hemp flax, or wool, or the inner bark of a certain tree were prescribed. Gautama says that these undergarments might also be of undyed cotton cloth, but if dyed the garment of a Brāhmaṇa should be dyed with red

1. Ibid, ii, p. 5.

2. P. E. Keay, Ancient Indian Education, Delhi, 1918 & 1980, p. 28-29.

dye from a tree, and those of the other two castes with madder and turmeric respectively. The staves carried also varied according to caste, reaching, in the case of the Brāhmaṇa, to the crown of the head; in the case of the kṣatriya, to the forehead; and in the case of the vaiśya, to the tip of the nose. The hair might be shaved or worn braided on the top, or there might be merely one look left on the crown. The arrangement of hair was probably regulated by the custom of the family.[1]

III. THE VEDĀRAṀBHA

It was the third educational ritual in ancient Mithilā. It was not mentioned in the earliest enumeration of the saṁskāras by Gautama.[2] The vedāraṁbha, as already pointed out, is first mentioned in the vyāsa Smṛti[3]. It differentiates the *Vratā desa,* a new name of the *upanayana,* from the vedāraṁbha. During the time of the author, the first had nothing to do with study, but the second was purely an educational Saṁskāra performed at the time when the student actually began his vedic study.[4] An auspicious day was fixed after the upanayana, for the performance of the vedāraṁbha saṁskāra. The Matrikāpūja the Ābhyudayika Śrāddha and other preliminary ceremonies were performed in the beginning. Then the teacher established the Laukika-Agni, invited the student and seated him on the western side of the fire. After this general offerings were made. If the Ṛgveda was to be began, two āhutis of ghee were offered to the earth and Agni; of the Yajurveda, to Antarikṣa (the sky) and Vāyu; of the Sāmveda, to Dyau and the sun; and in the Atharvaveda, to the quarters and the moon. If the study of all the vedas began together the above offerings were made together. Besides, Homa were offered to Brāhmaṇa Chhandas and Prajāpati. In the end the teacher having made gift of the Purṇapātra and Dakṣinā to the officiating Brāhmaṇa, began the teaching of the veda.[5]

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1. F. E. Keay., A. I. E. p. 30.
2. G. D. S. viii. p. 24.
3. Vyas Smṛti, i. p. 14.
4. R. B. Pandey., *Hindu Saṁskāra.*, p. 243.
5. *The Gargapaddhati.*

IV. THE KEŚĀNTA

It was the fourth educational ritual in ancient Mithilā. The Keśānta was one of the four vedic vratas.[1] Though it retained the ancient ceremonies, the keśānta separated and assumed an independent position, when the first three vratas that were closely connected with the vedic study, disappeared. The existence of the keśānta as a separate saṁskāra seems to be older than that of the vedāraṁbha. It was regarded as a major saṁskāra by Vyāsa who includes it in the list of the famous sixteen saṁskāras.[2]

It was a ritual which consecrated the first shaving of the student beard. It was also called Godāna, because it was characterized by the gift of a Cow to the teacher and gifts to the barber. This saṁskāra was performed at the age of sixteen and marked the arrival of youth when the student was no more a boy and beard and moustaches appeared on his face.[3] The procedure followed and the *mantras* recited at this saṁskāra were quite the same as adopted in the chauḍa-saṁskāra. The only difference was that in it beard and moustaches were shaved instead of head. Just as in the Chūḍākaraṇa, hair of the beard and head and also nails were thrown into water. The student, then, offered a Cow to the teacher. At the end of the ceremony he observed a vow of silence and led a life of austere discipline for full one year.[4]

V. THE SAMĀVARTANA

It was the last educational ritual in ancient Mithilā, Samāvartana means returning home from the Āśrama of the gurū.[5] This saṁskāra was performed at the close of the Brahmacharya period and it marked the termination of the student life. It was called Snāna also. This saṁskāra was originally performed in the case of those who had finished their entire course of studies and observed all the *vratas*. Thus in the beginning the samāvartana was a ceremony corresponding to modern convocation

1. Āśvālāyana quoted in *saṁskāra Mayikha*. p. 63.
2. *Vy. S.*, I. p. 14.
3. A. G. S., i. 18; *M. S.* II. 65.
4. R. B. Pandey. *Hindu Saṁskāra*, p. 248.
5. *P, G. S.*, ii, 5, 33.

function. Only those who had finished their education were allowed to take their bath and called Snātaka. There were three types of snatakas—vidyāsnātakas, vratasnātaka and ubhayasnātaka. Before the student took his bath he had to discharge a very important duty. He asked the permission of his master to end his student career and satisfied him with the gurū dakṣinā or tution fee.[1]

An auspicious day was fixed for the performance of this ritual, when the preliminary considerations were disposed of. In the case of a Brāhmaṇa student, according to some, a Homa was performed and the hope was expressed that the snātaka would get plenty of students to teach.[2] The teachers then, offered to the student the Madhu-Park indicating a great respect, for it was reserved for a few, e. g. a king, a teacher, or a son-in-law, etc.

Thus these five educational rituals were prevalent in ancient Mithilā. The educational rituals helped in the refinement and purification of human life, facilitated the development of personality, blessed all material and spiritual aspirations of man and ultimately prepared him for an easy and happy exit from this world of complexities and problems. The Vidyāraṁbha and the saṁskāras beginning with the upanayana and ending with the samāvartana are all of highly educational importance. In early societies there was no secular agency to enforce compulsory, served this purpose. Every child, if he was not mentally and physically involved, was to undergo a compulsory course of education involving learning and strict discipline. This maintained and enriched the intellectual and cultural heritage of ancient Maithilas.

Research Scholar
Dept. of A. I. H. and Arch.
Patna University,
Patna.

1. *A. G. S.* iii, 8.
2. Baudhāyana Gṛhya Sūtra, ii, p. 6.

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